

Primary Curriculum Review and Redevelopment

Written submission template for organisations, groups and individuals responding to the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*

This template is intended to support you (and your colleagues/organisation) in developing a written submission in response to the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*. Please e-mail your completed submission to PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie

Individual submission details

Name	
Date	
E-mail	

Organisation submission details

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Date	30/12/20
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Yes

No

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Please provide some brief background information on your organisation (if applicable).

The Mater Dei Centre for Catholic Education (MDCCE) is a structure within Dublin City University located at DCU Institute of Education, which speaks to and oversees the University's engagement with the Catholic education sector. DCU prepares teachers for the wide range of school types in Ireland, including Catholic primary and second-level schools. MDCCE offers the University an understanding of what is required for Catholic schools, and oversees modules which provide that focus. It applies itself to this task acknowledging the plural nature of Irish society and of the University itself, working with its staff and students in their variety. MDCCE is involved in high level research in Catholic education nationally and internationally. It also contributes to the training of chaplains for schools and other pastoral settings, and supports postgraduate students in preparing for leadership in the Catholic education sector. The Director, Dr Gareth Byrne, has been a lecturer and researcher in Religious Education across sectors for over 25 years, and was the chair of the recent NCCA Junior Cycle Religious Education Specification Development Group.

The remainder of the template includes two sections. Section 1 invites your overall comments and observations on the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*. Section 2 is structured to align with the six key messages related to the framework. Each message is summarised as a support for you in working on the submission.

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Section 1

Please outline your overall response to the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*.

The Mater Dei Centre for Catholic Education (MDCCE) welcomes the consultation set out by the NCCA in association with the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework, 2020*, and wishes to contribute to the debate by focusing on the significance of Religious Education across patronage systems and on the importance of providing a clear statement within the promised Curriculum Framework in support of the ethos embraced by patronage bodies and the characteristic spirit underpinning their schools. This submission responds, then, to a number of the questions posed in the template provided, offering commentary and suggestions specific to the focus indicated above.

In reflecting on the contribution of Catholic education in particular, MDCCE values the efforts being made by the NCCA in the continuing development and renewal of the Primary school curriculum. This is certainly necessary to ensure that the curriculum is appropriate for the needs of pupils today and tomorrow.

A national curriculum of this kind seeks to be broad enough and generous enough to embrace all pupils. In so doing, it must also seek to honour and give space to recognised patronage bodies, and the families supporting them, to fully provide for the curriculum from within their own reflected upon and cherished ethos, defined by the patron body and implemented by the school board of management. Patron bodies, boards of management, and school leaders, in turn must make it a priority to help young people in their schools contribute to the social cohesion and mutual respect a democratic society requires of its citizens.

Any future Primary Curriculum Framework must be feasible and sustainable for patronage systems, and encourage ownership of the new curriculum by schools, parents and pupils.

The following key principles, emergent in the years since the publication of the 1999 Primary Curriculum with the development of a more diverse society in Ireland, underpin this submission, and should, it is argued here, be attended to within any Curriculum Framework that grows out of this process:

1. In the Republic of Ireland existing patronage models, and perhaps new ones into the future, are *provided for* according to the remit set out in the Irish Constitution (Art. 42). These patronage systems serve parents who have sufficient support to establish viable schools whether religious, inter-religious, multi-faith or secular in nature. The role of patron must be clearly acknowledged in the Primary Curriculum Framework, more so than is currently evident in the Draft.
2. Religious Education is a subject that has traditionally been given high priority in schools in Ireland, built on and acknowledging the diversity of Christian traditions of most of those schools up to the present day. Such Religious Education must be educationally grounded, exhibit an interreligious character, respond to the needs of the learner according to their developmental phase and experience, and contribute to their search for meaning and value, both as an individual and in the context of any community of faith or conviction with which they are associated.
3. The rights of the child as a citizen and the importance of social cohesion in a modern society require an educational foundation to Religious Education – at a minimum learning about religion and belief. Anything less opens society to the possibility in future generations of ignorance, lack of respect, and even conflict (*Toledo Guiding Principles*).

4. Religious Education, in an appropriate form should be provided for all children in all schools, religious or secular, irrespective of patron, in a manner that abides by freedom of religion and belief.
5. Faith schools, working with parents and families, must be free to provide faith formation activities for the pupils of the faith tradition of the patron, and may work with other parents and families, as these partners desire, to provide other forms of formation in the variety of religious faith and secular convictions present in the school. The ethos of faith schools is what the school is built on, but ethos and the particular characteristic spirit of a school evolves too in order to respond to the needs of its pupils and their families. The Catholic Church in Ireland, for example, expects its schools to be characterised by respect, justice, hospitality, critical reflection, and open to and enriched by pupils from all cultures and backgrounds (Irish Episcopal Conference, *Share the Good News*, 148). It is transparent, at the same time, in acknowledging the service offered to Catholic parents: 'The Catholic school, as an outreach of the local parish, will seek to nourish the faith of its Catholic students and assist in their Christian initiation. It will respect the religious tradition of other students and facilitate them in every way.' (*Share the Good News*, 147).
6. All schools irrespective of patron, must respond appropriately to multi-cultural diversity, including diversity of religion and beliefs, so evident today within the educational community created in schools. Catholic pupils, for example, should expect that they, and their religious tradition and experience, would be treated respectfully in all schools.
7. Primary school education is part of a continuum which includes nurturing a commitment to lifelong learning. The 1999 Curriculum notes this, seeing the Primary curriculum as playing its part in, 'laying the foundation for the development of self-reliance in learning and a sense of responsibility for personal fulfilment.' (*Primary School Curriculum: Introduction*, p. 31).

Section 2

Agency and flexibility in schools

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework proposes that the redeveloped curriculum will:

- Be for every child.
- Recognise teachers' and principals' agency and professionalism to enact the curriculum in their individual school context.
- Give more flexibility to schools in terms of planning and timetabling to identify and respond to priorities and opportunities.
- Connect with different school contexts in the education system.
- Give greater opportunities for flexibility and choice for children's learning.

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework outlines important messages in relation to agency and flexibility in schools. Please give your overall feedback in relation to this key message.

Curriculum connections between preschool, primary and post-primary schools

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework proposes that the redeveloped curriculum will:

- Provide a clear vision for children's learning across the eight years of primary school.
- Link with learning experiences provided through the themes of the *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and connect with the subjects, key skills and statements of learning in the *Framework for Junior Cycle*.
- Support educational transitions by connecting with what and how children learn at home, in preschool and post-primary school.

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework outlines important messages in relation to curriculum connections between preschool, primary and post-primary schools. Please give your overall feedback in relation to this key message.

Emerging priorities for children's learning

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework proposes that the redeveloped curriculum will:

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- Embed seven key competencies across children’s learning outcomes from junior infants to sixth class.
- Focus on developing children’s skills, knowledge, dispositions, values and attitudes. The Learning Outcomes and the Key Competencies are broad in nature to describe this wider understanding of learning.
- Have increased emphasis on some existing areas such as PE and SPHE (Wellbeing) and digital learning, and have new aspects such as Modern Foreign Languages, Technology, Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics, and a broader Arts Education.

The *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* outlines important messages in relation to emerging priorities for children’s learning. Please give your overall feedback in relation to this key message.

Changing how the curriculum is structured and presented

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework proposes that the redeveloped curriculum will:

- Be broad and balanced in purpose and content.
- Be structured in five broad curriculum areas;
 - Language
 - Mathematics, Science and Technology Education
 - Wellbeing
 - Social and Environmental Education
 - Arts Education.

(In addition to the five areas above, the Patron’s Programme is developed by a school’s patron with the aim of contributing to the child’s holistic development particularly from the religious and/or ethical perspective and in the process, underpins and supports the characteristic spirit of the school. These areas connect to the themes of *Aistear* and to the subject-based work in Junior Cycle.)

- Provide for an integrated learning experience, with curriculum areas in Stages 1 and 2 (junior Infants – second Class) and more subject-based learning in Stages 3 and 4 (third class – sixth class).

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- Use broad learning outcomes to describe the expected learning and development for children.
- Incorporate the new *Primary Language Curriculum / Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile*.

The *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* outlines important messages in relation to changing how the curriculum is structured and presented. Please give your overall feedback in relation to this key message.

A number of key observations need to be made in relation to how religious education, and spiritual and ethical education, are conceived of within the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*:

- A. The 1998 Education Act, sets out the role of education as being to ‘promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students, and provide health education for them, in consultation with their parents, having regard for the characteristic spirit of the school. (*Education Act 1998*, 9.d). The Primary Curriculum 1999, provides a similar focus, noting ‘the spiritual, moral, cognitive, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, social and physical’ elements central to education (*Primary School Curriculum: Introduction*, p. 6). The emphasis on the spiritual and moral dimensions of a holistic approach to education are evident and strongly supported in these documents and should be so in the proposed Curriculum Framework.
- B. In the *Primary School Curriculum*, 1999, ‘Religious Education’ was one of the 7 curriculum areas (*Primary School Curriculum: Introduction*, 1999, p. 40). It was noted, in a time when the Churches in connection with parents in the locality, provided nearly all primary school opportunities in the community, that, ‘the development of the curriculum for Religious education remains the responsibility of the different church authorities’ (*Primary School Curriculum: Introduction*, p. 40). Since then with the development of a variety of patronage systems the responsibility has been understood to lie with patron bodies.
- C. While the curriculum area under the 1999 Curriculum remained ‘Religious Education’, a variety of approaches have emerged since then in terms recognised as relating to the religious, spiritual and ethical. The important thing is that they do address the religious, spiritual and ethical questions in the lives of young people and are held to account in that regard by their patron. Sometimes these approaches acknowledge the formational aspects associated with any curriculum area, sometimes less so implying the sufficiency of a kind of neutral presentation of material about religions and belief. Teaching and learning in religious, spiritual and ethical education, just as in other areas should be highly affective and active, the cognitive dimension emerging more strongly as the years progress. This is not to suggest that the latter is any less important but that it be developmentally appropriate, and not make the mistake at primary-level of discussing religion, spirituality and ethics in a manner more suited to second- or indeed third-level.
- D. The *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* acknowledges the importance of attending to the religious, spiritual and ethical domain (p. 3), and this is to be greatly welcomed. Anything less would be to deny or at least downplay a significant area in the child’s development and to undermine any claim that schools seek to provide a holistic education for the young person. The place of the religious, spiritual and ethical should however be more clearly stated at the beginning of the text and specifically in the piece

designated 'Vision' (*Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*, p. 7), using a formula such as that provided in the Education Act and the 1999 Curriculum (see A above). As is, this important dimension of a full education provision appears to be considered and given its place dependent on the patron's desire for such an element. The Education Act and the previous Curriculum see this area as an essential and natural part of the education of young people. This emphasis on its essential nature should not be lost, even if it is the patrons who decide how to approach it.

- E. The language on p. 11 of the Draft is inadequate to the task the NCCA sets itself in regard to the religious, spiritual and ethical. While the accompanying diagram indicates six 'Curriculum areas and subjects' (p. 11, Figure 3), including the patron's programme, the text speaks about *five* broad curriculum areas only. It then provides a comment that patrons have the legal right to design their own programme in accordance with the ethos of their schools, acknowledging that this programme, 'forms part of the children's learning experience in primary school.' (p. 11). The commentary here fails to give the religious, spiritual and ethical its name, and in effect places it outside the national curriculum. On pages 13-14, however, each of the six curriculum areas are provided for. It is clear that the text on p. 11 requires immediate attention. The tenor of the rest of the document is that there are six curriculum area, and a unified curriculum, one area of which, the religious, spiritual and ethical, is overseen by the patron bodies. The reference to the publication of the forthcoming Primary Curriculum Framework in 2021, on p. 4 of the Draft, should indicate that it ...will inform and guide the NCCA's development of a specification for each of the five curriculum areas for which the NCCA holds responsibility... (see *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*, p. 4), maintaining always that there are six curriculum areas.
- F. There is an argument here for retaining Religious Education as the curriculum area – and certainly as the name of the subject in Stage 3-4 (3rd - 6th Class). It can be expected that this will be the route taken in Catholic schools. Retaining Religious Education as the subject area also continues to provide continuity with the curriculum framework developments that have taken place at second-level. If a move away from the 1999 Curriculum is made in this regard then the curriculum area could be referred to as 'Religious Education/ Spiritual Education/ Ethical Education', thus acknowledging the educational nature of the subject area while allowing patron bodies to style the subject-based learning in 3rd - 6th Class in a manner coherent with the overall curriculum area title.
- G. The suggested reduction in time for Religious Education/Spiritual Education/Ethical Education, from 2.5 hours a week to 2 hours, will not be acceptable in the Catholic education sector, and possibly other sectors. It symbolises and puts into effect a diminishment of the religious, spiritual and ethical in the curriculum, in the daily life of the school, and in the attention given to this dimension of their education by pupils. Anything less than provision for half an hour per day, or the equivalent, will be a cause of contention.
- H. MDCCE welcomes the inclusion of Wellbeing as a curriculum area and in particular supports the commitment here to the fostering of spiritual health (p. 8) and reflection on the spiritual dimension of living and the exploration of life's meaning (p. 9). It is not at all clear, however, what is meant by the subject Social, Personal and Values Education under the curriculum area Wellbeing, and in particular why values education has appeared under this heading. While this will be difficult for those who have focused on the development of Social, Personal and Health Education, it is also true that values have more usually been associated with the religious, spiritual and ethical considerations attributed to the patron's programme. The obvious question here is what values are being

considered in this subject area and whether they would cross over or possibly be in opposition to the patron's programme, its ethos and spirit. This is not to say that this would be the case, but without a reference here to engagement with and through the patron's programme difficulties may well arise.

Supporting a variety of pedagogical approaches and strategies with assessment central to teaching and learning

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework proposes that the redeveloped curriculum will:

- Promote high quality teaching, learning and assessment.
- Conceptualise assessment as an essential and critical part of teaching and learning.
- Highlight the importance of teachers' professional judgement in supporting progression in children's learning.
- Encourage teachers to make meaningful connections with children's interests and experiences.
- Recognise the significance of quality relationships and their impact on children's learning.
- Recognise the role and influence of parents and families in children's education.

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework outlines important messages in relation to supporting a variety of pedagogical approaches and strategies with assessment central to teaching and learning. Please give your overall feedback in relation to this key message.

Building on the successes and strengths of the 1999 curriculum while recognising and responding to the challenges and changing needs and priorities.

The 1999 curriculum contributed to many successes including:

- Enhanced enjoyment of learning for children.
- Increased use of active methodologies for teaching and learning.
- Improved attainment levels in reading, mathematics and science as evidenced in national and international assessments.

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework proposes that the redeveloped curriculum will:

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- Address curriculum overload at primary level.
- Take stock of strategies, initiatives and programmes and clarify priorities for children’s learning.
- Link with *Aistear* and *the Framework for Junior Cycle*.

The *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* outlines important messages in relation to building on the successes and strengths of the 1999 curriculum while recognising and responding to challenges and changing needs and priorities. Please give your overall feedback in relation to this key message.

Developments in the religious, spiritual and ethical dimension of education should build on the 1999 Primary Curriculum rather than depart from its commitment to the holistic education of young people. The impression in some parts of the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* is that, in response to the plural nature of Irish society this area is being given a lower priority, a diminished recognition, and as it were, squeezed in occasionally because perhaps it should be mentioned.

This MDCCE contribution to the consultation process suggests that it is because of the very plurality of Irish society today, and the need to build a highly cohesive society into the future, that the religious, spiritual and ethical should be given more attention not less, and should be built in strongly and comfortably within the structure of the new Curriculum and given appropriate priority (which the sixth curriculum area suggests but as of yet does not fully spell out). The State can and should require that all schools at primary-level have a clear understanding of the significant role of Religious Education, described in different ways by different patron bodies, but always attending to the religious, spiritual and ethical needs of pupils, and insist on adequate provision supported by specific school policies and practices.

In summary, any dissatisfaction in the way in which Religious Education, Spiritual Education, Ethical Education, and Values Education, are framed and engaged with across the curriculum, might see some patron bodies having difficulty in adopting the new curriculum in their schools. Equally the NCCA needs to feel that the requirements set out in any new Curriculum Framework would commit schools to including an appropriate programme in religious, spiritual and ethical education. This is not simply an option, as without such a programme not all essential curriculum areas and subjects will have been attended to by the school.

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Thank you for your submission.

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